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Intended for researchers in a variety of fields, this journal issue contains articles that provide guidance for technical writing for publication. Following an introduction, the first article explores some of the reasons papers are rejected by editors, including research design problems, lack of clarity and style, or unsuitability for the journal. The second article offers peer editing tips for professionals, specifically how to work with a partner and how to speed edit to assess a document's purpose, audience, scope, and structure. The third article offers seven specific guidelines for clearer, more precise prose writing. (HTH)

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EFFECTIVE WRITING: GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

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INTRODUCTION

by Cheryl W. Ruggiero

For the past decade, I have been teaching writing, advising writers, and editing manuscripts. I've counseled researchers in a variety of fields, including sociology, law, engineering, economics, food sciences, textiles, computer science, education, veterinary medicine, and communication. They have expressed feelings about writing that range from pleasure in the challenge to dread of ever having to do it again, and from arrogance to abject insecurity. Many seemed to struggle not only with their methodology and data but with a shadowy monster, both hostile and competitive, which hovered "out there in the profession" ready to attack, devour, and destroy. Most had missed, in their earlier writing experiences, the straightforward advice and open encouragement of colleagues.

This issue of the *AIR Professional File* offers both and is a first-rate sample of what is greatly needed, not just in institutional research but throughout the academic community. Elton, with the authority of experience and the energy of good humor, names and dispels the monster, and provides an insider's insight into what makes writing good enough to publish. Liberated by Elton, readers will find that Mullins next lets them in on two techniques that much-published colleagues have probably been using all along. She details sound, specific practices that can change writing from a lonely, defensive grind into an expansive and genuinely possible act. The reader is then ready for Smoot's lively advice on sentence style, which can keep a writer from burying good information in sleep-inducing "unnecessary complexity." From motivations to mechanics, these good writers give good advice.

I hope that these articles will set many of you back to writing, and to writing more clearly and directly. We are a body of inquirers, and written work both nourishes and moves us. Most of us rarely go even a week without learning something that would be useful for someone else, whether it is a local detail or a global principle. The rest of us need to read about it! If we don't write—more and better—to each other, many of us are likely to remain number crunchers and file makers—discovering, but failing to interpret and communicate. That would be a loss for all of us. To gain instead, we need to reject the fear of rejection, find partnerships, break free of entangling roundabout phrases, and WRITE! ■

REFLECTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS OF AN EDITOR

by Charles F. Elton

As I was overtaking two colleagues in a hall during a national conference, I overheard one say, "... the main reason I hesitate to write for publication is my fear of being rejected." I was startled to hear an apparently honest confession and, as I passed them, the sympathetic response, "Yeh, me too." I say "honest confession" because usually it is phrased as "lack of time." Never have I heard "lack of anything worthwhile to write about," but perhaps I should spend more time in

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hallways! Can fear of rejection be conquered by knowledge and information? Since almost everyone has time and data worth sharing through the publication process, let us assume that fear of rejection can be subdued by knowledge.

I recommend that you begin by reciting daily: "Have I ever met someone who has published and who has not been rejected?" Let's start a new club. If you will ask your published colleagues if they have had articles rejected, I'll begin a national honor roll of those who answer "No." I might even try to raise some prize money. Of course, you'll have to send me their names and promise to tell them what you're doing because we don't want to embarrass anyone! (I have a friend who keeps a national honor roll of liars.)

Selecting Your Title

I admit to being perverse, but the place to begin your stand against "fear of rejection" is with the title of your article or paper. Now, I know what most people do: write the title absolutely last (but before revision, of course). Ask yourself before you start planning an article, "What is the title of my paper?" If you can answer that question in ten words or less you're off to an excellent start. This is a worthwhile beginning because the title may help in the literature review and serve as a beacon for organizing the discussion and conclusion sections.

You will know you are making rapid progress when you begin altering the titles of others' articles, after reading them. Probably the first thing to do is attempt to shorten the title. While it's a rule of thumb and exists only to be broken, you should start out with a handicap of ten words or less. Consider the following title: "Computer-Prepared Questionnaires and Grouping Theories: Considerations for Mail Survey in Academic Settings." Yes, I published that title, but an improved version is "Comparison of Questionnaire Responses Using Holland and Biglan Models."

Recently, a writer observed that a colon in the title seemed to be characteristic of most published articles. He even wondered, tongue-in-cheek, whether it might be an absolute requirement for getting an article accepted for publication. You will have passed the test for overcoming "fear of rejection" when it is second nature to alter titles with colons in them. Therefore, it may not be surprising to learn that journal reviewers recommend a change in title for approximately twenty-five percent of the articles they review.

Reasons for Rejection

Why are manuscripts usually rejected? The major reasons given by two reviewers for rejecting 92 manuscripts submitted to *Research in Higher Education* were tabulated and categorized; the percentage of total comments made, from highest to lowest, were as follows: statistical problems (22%); research design problems (19%); discussion and conclusion problems (16%); lack of reader appeal (14%); inadequate literature review (12%); problems of clarity and style (10%); lack of contribution to the literature (8%).

Statistical and Research Design Issues. Almost half of the paper rejections involve statistical and research design issues. Furthermore, because discussion and conclusion criticisms tend to flow directly from inappropriate statistical and design problems, 56 percent involve methodological concerns. This provides additional support for the suggestion by Carolyn Mullins that you ask a colleague who is quantitatively sophisticated to review your paper before sending it off for publication. Better yet, seek some advice before beginning the analysis of your data!

Some may grumble, " . . . but that requires a lot of time and bother!" I agree. The value placed on time varies among individuals, to be sure. However, I'd be inclined to spend time on almost anything if I knew that the probability of a desired and favorable payoff increased by 50 percent as a result.

Do statisticians always receive favorable reviews then? No, not always. However, their acceptance rate, per article submitted, is among the highest of any comparison group.

In passing, it should be noted that occasionally a paper is rejected because of a methodological issue, when it should have been accepted. Reviewers and editors have feet of clay, too. So, should that happen, don't be afraid to take pen in hand (or word processor) and tell the editor that the reviewers probably didn't read your paper carefully enough. (Always blame the reviewers rather than the editor; I do.) It is good form to present, also, the reasons for the misunderstanding, regardless of whom you blame. The odds are that the editor will reconsider the paper and either select new reviewers to assess your paper or forward your comments to the original reviewers for their responses to your concerns. Generally, editors are impressed with authors who are able to defend their methodology.

Lack of Reader Interest. The rejection of a paper for the fourth most common reason (lack of interest to the readers) is almost always due to author laziness or ignorance, or both. The author should not submit a manuscript to a journal that he/she has not perused beforehand. Or, as editorial law number 3 states: "If you haven't read the journal, don't send it there." (Please don't inquire about the first four laws.) A trip to the library may result in the discovery of a plethora of journals that might be interested in publishing your paper.

In examining each journal, look for and read the "information for authors" section, usually found inside the front or back cover. (Occasionally, that section appears only once each year.) It is there that you will discover whether or not your paper "fits" that journal, that is, whether regular readers will be interested in your paper. Should a journal not contain a section for authors, cross it off your list of potential outlets and continue your search. Ask colleagues what journals they subscribe to, or if they know someone who subscribes to a particular journal of interest that may not be in the library. As a fringe benefit of this technique, you'll increase the number of friends and acquaintances—or, at least, the friends will outnumber the grouches!

A second major benefit is derived from a thorough reading of the journal. You learn in a relatively painless manner about the journal's style and format. There is more variation in journal style and format than seems possible for the relatively small number of journals that exist. Nonetheless, reviewers and editors are well acquainted with these journal vagaries. At all costs, you do not want your paper's format to imply to a reviewer that it has been rejected by another journal. Hell hath no fury like a journal that believes it has been chosen only as "second best!" The corollary of this notion is self-evident. Should your paper be rejected by a journal with a different style or format than is required by the one to which you will submit it next, it is well worth your time and effort to retype your paper in the approved form. (More about this later.) Every editor and reviewer has had occasion to read a manuscript with not only a "foreign" format but with the original reviewer's critical comments still visible in the margins! There may be a better way to ensure rejection, but offhand I can't think of it.

It is probably a waste of time and money to telephone an editor to inquire whether or not your paper is suitable for a specific journal. Most editors are hesitant to make that decision over the phone. Their likely responses boil down to, "We'll be glad to review the article and send you our comments." For that effort you have learned that it may or may not fit the readers of that journal.

Inadequate Literature Review. Inadequate literature review, the fifth reason given for not accepting an article, stems from the habitual reading patterns followed by review editors. That is, the title is read first, followed by the abstract, and then the references. Editors usually send manuscripts to reviewers who are interested and especially competent in specific topics. Suppose a reviewer is reading a paper on student attrition and does not find the name or names of Pascarella, Spady, Terenzini, or Tinto in the reference section. Before reading the paper, the reviewer has decided that the literature review is inadequate. Evidence that the author does not appear to be acquainted with the mainstream literature on student attrition is not likely to make a good impression.

Clarity and Style. Problems of clarity and style have been dealt with in another section of this issue—Editing Professional Writing. Again, a friend, colleague, or spouse may be of great help in these matters. Usually, problems of clarity and style are encountered more frequently among beginning authors than with experienced writers—or, as Bacon noted, "Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man."

Contribution to the Literature. The last reason identified by reviewers for rejecting a paper is that it does not contribute to the literature. The implication of this criticism is that the paper does not add knowledge beyond that already supplied by numerous studies that have appeared on that topic. An example might be another study on the relationship of grade point average to SAT or ACT scores. The correlations between these variables have been reported so frequently that there is little or no justification for yet another example at "Institution X." Editors are conscious of the costs associated with publishing a paper and the backlog of papers waiting to be published. They are, therefore, reluctant to accept an article on a topic that has been exhaustively researched and does not add something new to the literature.

Dealing with Rejection

A common assumption made by many editorial reviewers is that there is a journal willing to publish any manuscript that exists. This belief may be a close relative of the one that assumes there is a college willing to enroll any applicant! And, at times, in a letter of rejection, an editor may suggest the name of another journal that the author might consider as an outlet for an article. (This is more frequent if the article does not "fit" the journal's readership.) Currently my position is a straddle. That is, I WOULD encourage a beginning author who receives a rejection note to revise the article and submit it elsewhere. After an author has published seven to ten articles, unless the editor invites a revision, a rejected article is probably best filed away for some other occasion and energy devoted to a new manuscript. This opinion is based on the assumption that for an experienced, published author, it is non-productive to spend much time trying to rescue a rejected manuscript. However, I hasten to add, "Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it may be for an errant editor."

Exploring Other Avenues

For those to whom quantitative studies are abhorrent, potential for publication is still extremely rosy. Literature reviews are among the most desired and valuable articles in print. Most editors begin to salivate when one of these shows up in the morning mail. Dedicated work, lots of time, and persistent motivation are their hallmarks. Perhaps that accounts for their relative rarity. Begin with a topic that fascinates you, read everything that has been written on that topic, and organize it! Since a common problem is organization, that skill may be improved by reading several examples: the annual review published by *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, any article in *Review of Educational Research*, or any of Kenneth Feldman's articles in *Research in Higher Education*.

Finally, remember that happiness is getting an article accepted for publication!■

WORK SMARTER: WRITING TIPS FOR PROFESSIONALS

by Carolyn J. Mullins

Adding two techniques to your bag of writing tools will help you write more efficiently and effectively. These techniques, working with a partner and speed editing, help with any kind of writing but work especially well for academics and professionals.

Unbiased Evaluation Helps You Revise Better

The act of writing involves you deeply in your topic. That's good because it helps you keep going even over rough spots. It's also bad, though, because it blinds you to the flaws in what you've written, and objectivity is probably the single most important ingredient in successful revision. There's also a small matter of ego; most writers' work means a great deal to them. The more effort they've devoted to their work, the more the work means and the harder it is to cut, rework, and generally revise effectively.

How do you get objectivity without sacrificing the involvement that keeps you going? One way is to work with a partner who can read and criticize your work without being hung up on feelings. When you and a partner act as critics for each other two or three times in the course of revising a document, both of you gain by being able to work more efficiently and effectively. A second way is to learn speed editing, which lets you work on your own documents without sacrificing objectivity.

This section tells how to make both techniques work for you.

Two Heads Are Better Than One

An old saying has it that two heads are better than one, and it certainly holds for writing skills. Criticism is hard to take, especially the first few times, but a critic's unbiased opinions are your ticket to better and faster writing.

Good critics offer a viewpoint different from yours and thus can spot things you haven't made clear. They stimulate your thinking by asking questions and making suggestions. Because they can work on a document that you've had to lay aside for a time, they make it possible for you to gain some distance from the manuscript and still "work" on it.

They also help to assure accuracy and, in an organization or on certain research projects, they help you avoid violation of rules and regulations on confidentiality. You'll usually find, too, that critics' questions and attempts to clarify help you to think more logically.

As you provide help in return, you'll make a marvelous and comforting discovery: You're not the only writer in the world who produces terrible first drafts and forgets important steps.

Sometimes partners wind up coauthoring papers with each other, but that's not the intent of working with a partner. The purpose is simply to provide you with someone who can help you work more effectively (or share the blame when things go wrong).

Who Can Do It?

Just about any educated person can act as a critic for an academic or other professional. Most people prefer to find a partner in their own field or office, but some deliberately pick someone who isn't. Why? These writers figure that they've communicated clearly if an outsider understands.

Some writers use a spouse (though that can strain the marriage if the criticism isn't handled carefully), and some use an editor or editorial consultant.

What Help When?

You can ask for help at three different times in the document production cycle. One is right after the first draft, when you'd otherwise have to put the thing in a bottom drawer and forget it for a time (also known as "cooling" it). The second is after you've done an organizational overhaul and whipped your headings and subheadings into shape. The third is toward the end of the process when you think you've got all the wording straight and you're about ready to produce a final copy.

On a first draft, ask for general criticism of organization and substance. Ask particularly that the critic mark sections that seem to repeat and sections that he or she was unprepared for. As you and your partner gain experience, you'll also be able to mark for each other places in the document where you were expecting topics that never appeared. Speed editing, discussed later, helps you evaluate a first draft rapidly and effectively.

On a later draft, ask critics to check the logic of organization and mark sections that seem redundant. There shouldn't be many such sections at this stage. Ask them to mark sections that don't have enough headings and subheadings, sentences that aren't clear, technical language you've used unnecessarily, grammatical errors, and so on. The goal of this check is to work at a level of detail that's not possible or appropriate on a first draft. With technical writers and editors and experienced critics, you can also benefit from editing and rewriting that gives you sentences you can use and, even when wrong, shows clearly where and why you're failing to communicate.

For long-term writing improvement, start a list of comments and corrections that recur often. Keep the list over your desk and use the suggestions as a guide to better writing. As you finally get faults crossed off the list, replace them with new ones. Writing is a dynamic process; you can always learn something new about it, so you should never be without an improvement card.

Conversely, because improving writing is tough work, never saddle yourself with too many things to improve at the same time. Try not to have more than five items on that list at once.

How To Ask for Help

The nicest way to ask for help is in person. Ask until you find someone who is willing to try working with you. When you have the first document ready, make a list of things you think might be wrong with it. Write down the date by which you need to have a response. Thank the critic when the document returns, and offer to return the favor.

When you act as a critic yourself, be as tactful as possible. Try to offer constructive suggestions. For instance, "This is a terrible section" will irritate even the most even-tempered author. But, "You need more background information here" will help the author repair a flaw without feeling defensive. There is a Golden Rule for success as a critic: "If you can't say something nice, at least say it tactfully."

Peace of Mind versus a Sea of Comments

Most writers greet that first document-full of suggestions with a sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach. And particularly when they're new to partner work, they may find any criticism hard to accept. To make that task easier, remind yourself that the critic is saving you time. You'd never find all those mistakes on your own.

Take every comment seriously. Even when critics don't describe a problem correctly, almost always they have pointed out a genuine problem that needs fixing. I once had a client to whom a journal referee had returned his article with the comment that he couldn't see why the author had "discussed sexuality for only three pages" when, clearly, that topic was central to the document. My client was livid; he came to me with his fingers clasping a hefty group of pages that discussed sexuality. When I looked at his headings, though, this is what I found:

The section on sexuality was only three pages long, but the section on dating behavior continued the discussion. The referee had been misled by the headings. A true reflection of the document's organization looked more like this:

I. Problem statement
II. Method section
III. Sexuality
  A. Definition
  B. Dating behavior
IV. Discussion and conclusions

With a simple change in headings and heading levels and very little else, that paper went back to the journal editor, who returned the article to the referee, who recommended acceptance for publication. (Example adapted from Mullins, 1983.)

Some writers object that the critic should have read more carefully, but they miss the point. No reader should ever be required to guess what it is you mean. Your responsibility is to communicate accurately. In general, if a critic interprets your words in a certain, wrong way, chances are other readers will make the same error.

When a comment doesn't make sense, even after you've given it considerable thought, either ask the critic nicely to discuss the problem with you or have someone else read and criticize. CAUTION: Restrict yourself to clarification. Don't debate. Debating may well cost you the help of your critic.

Speed Editing

Speed editing combines skim reading with brief notes to help you grasp a document's contents quickly. The technique is best learned on a partner's document because you won't get hung up on its familiarity. Once you've acquired skill, though, you can use it to evaluate your own documents, where you'll find it a useful aid to gaining objectivity.

The purpose of the technique, which is most useful on first drafts but can also be used later in the revision process, is to assess the document's reader, purpose, scope, and apparent plan (outline). To use the technique, follow these steps:

1. Skim the document quickly. Try to identify the intended reader (who is going to get this document, and is it appropriately written for that reader?); the purpose (why is the writer writing?); and the scope (what range does the topic cover?). Skim by placing your hand at the top of the first page with the fingers spread from one margin to the other. Draw your hand down the page rapidly, forcing your eyes to follow along just above the fingers. Try to train your eyes to take in a line at a time, not just a few words (this takes time). Take no more than five minutes to skim a 30-page document.
2. Return to the front of the document. In the margin, briefly summarize the topic of each paragraph and its connection to the paragraph just before it. If you see no connection, say so. Make the notes brief; they don't need to be neat or thorough. Take no more than a minute per page to make notes.
3. When you've taken notes on every page, try to make an outline of the document down to the third level of importance (roman numerals, capital letters, arabic numerals). Don't use the author's outline as a guide, even if it's been given to you. (Most documents change shape as the author writes.) What you want to know is the outline the author actually used, not the outline he or she tried to use. Also, don't try to evaluate or reorganize. All you want is "the facts" of the situation.
4. Next, try to find a central theme for the document. What's it all about? Try to write the theme in fewer than 50 words. If you weren't able to identify the reader earlier, try again now.
5. Now, evaluate the plan of organization by marking on the outline where topics repeat, where they seem out of place, or where topics treated at the same level of importance don't actually appear to be equally important. This evaluation is the basis for organizational revision of the document.

This technique seems immensely difficult at first. Most writers simply aren't used to forcing themselves to skim quickly and to take notes sloppily. If you don't,

though, you'll spend too much time at the task. Not only does that waste your time, it also destroys some of the objectivity you bring to the task. The beauty of speed editing is precisely that it lets you review documents objectively.

Once you've learned the technique on documents belonging to others, you'll be able to use it on your own document. Objectivity will always be a problem, but not as much so with this technique because it makes you concentrate on the forest (the whole document), not the trees (words, sentences, and paragraphs). You'll also find the technique handy for grading papers and tests, evaluating documents you referee for journals and fund-granting organizations, and a host of other documents.

Note: For more information on these techniques and how they fit into a systematic process for writing and revising, see Mullins (1980). Chapters 11-13 explain systematic, efficient revision in detail.

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EDITING PROFESSIONAL WRITING

by Joyce G. Smoot

Most of us try to make our prose clear, straightforward, and efficient. We can't always avoid complexity; sometimes our writing is complex because our subjects are complex. Fine. But sometimes we create unnecessary complexity because of our writing styles. In a hurried world, we need to avoid such inefficiency.

Specifically, though, how can writers reduce the unnecessary noise in their writing? This article provides some answers by discussing seven specific guidelines and applying them to samples of prose from institutional research reports. (Points 1, 2, 3, 4 adapted from UCLA, 1981; points 5, 6, 7 adapted from Venolia, 1982.)

1. Avoid slow sentence beginnings.

   Most sentences beginning with *there is* and *it is*, for example, can be efficiently revised. Consider this sentence: "It is unnecessary to await the arrival of universal and inexpensive inter-mainframe communication." Editing produces "Awaiting the arrival of universal and inexpensive intermainframe communication is unnecessary," a revision that is more forceful and less wordy.

2. Don't use a form of the weak verb, *to be*, when you can use a strong, active verb.

   The subject and verb positions are the most powerful positions in a sentence; don't dilute this power with mere placeholder verbs. Compare the sentence, "This problem is in need of investigation," to this, "This problem needs investigation." The second version is clearly more economical and direct.

3. Avoid using strings of prepositional phrases.

   Prepositions connect nouns or pronouns with some other word (the object of the preposition) and show the relationship between the noun or pronoun and the object. Common prepositions include *about, by, during, for, from, in, of, on, to, upon,* and *with.* The information contained in prepositional phrases can frequently be included in other, smoother ways.

   Consider this sentence: "An introduction to the Virginia budget process is necessary for an understanding of our decision-theoretic model." Notice that the sentence contains three prepositional phrases, "to the Virginia budget process," "for an understanding," and "of our decision-theoretic model."

   By using an active verb instead of *is* and revising the prepositional phrases, we get, "An introduction to the Virginia budget process will help readers understand our decision-theoretic model," a sentence with only one prepositional phrase and, consequently, a much smoother rhythm.

4. Don't use the passive voice unless you have a specific reason for doing so.

   In the active voice, the subject of the sentence does the acting. In the sentence, the staff submitted a report," for example, the subject, *staff,* does the action of submitting and the object, *report,* receives the action of being submitted.

   In the passive voice, though, the subject of the sentence receives the action. The passive-voice version of our example sentence is "The report was submitted by the staff."

   Why does it matter whether you choose the active or passive voice since both sentences convey the same idea? The active uses fewer words and is more straightforward; passive-voice sentences can be unnecessarily complicated.

   But please don't misinterpret; in some cases the passive is clearly more appropriate than the active. When you don't know the doer of the action or wish to emphasize the receiver instead of the doer, you have a clear reason for choosing the passive voice.

5. When possible, condense clauses beginning with *which, that,* or *who* into fewer words.

   Clauses are word groups which appear before, after, or within the main sentence to add additional information. Frequently, though, this information can be added more economically in other ways. Compare these two sentences: "The report, which was lengthy, discussed the add-drop period," and "The lengthy report discussed the add-drop period."

6. Avoid using roundabout phrases. Here are some typical examples and suggested revisions:

Roundabout	Revision
some questions related to this issue	some relevant questions
due to the fact that	because
in spite of the fact that	although
on a theoretical level	in theory
is now engaged in a study	is now studying

7. Avoid too-lengthy sentences.

   Present your information in shorter, more manageable segments. While a few centuries ago the average sentence had 60 words, today it has only twenty (Venolia, 1982, p. 19).

By following these guidelines, you can substantially reduce inefficiency, weakness, and unwieldiness in your prose. Your readers will surely appreciate your efforts.

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